

ARCHDEACONS' VISITATION CHARGE 2008

Peter Hill, Archdeacon of Nottingham

Hebrews 1:1-4

1 In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets; 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 12:1-3

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Churchwardens overhear all sorts of conversations during their duties.

But here are some snippets you **may not** have heard:

- Excuse me, it's my turn to sit in the front pew.
- Vicar, I was so enthralled, I didn't notice you'd preached for 45 minutes.
- I love to sing hymns I've never heard before.
- I volunteer to clean the church every week for as long as you want.
- Vicar, we'd like to send you to this conference in Marjoca.

Oh, that church life were so!

The ministry and mission we share as wardens and clergy together is demanding, occasionally distressing and sometimes frustrating.

At a Visitation in 1578 the Archdeacon of Bedfordshire received reports from several churchwardens that their churches were in a poor repair because of the theft of lead from church roofs. Other wardens were disturbed because they had been without a priest for a long time and wanted to know when they were going to get their next vicar! There is nothing new under the sun - what goes around comes around!

Yet leadership in the church of God is also exciting, fulfilling and heartening - a true adventure of faith in God.

Both sides of this coin are expressed in our readings from Hebrews. Visualize with me the scene the writer paints in *chapter 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, Do you see the picture in the writers mind?*

An athletics stadium (cf the upcoming Beijing Olympics), full of spectators urging the athletes on as they strive to cross the finish line. There is the excitement of a race, yet the hard slog of keeping going to the tape. As leaders in the church of Christ we are all **CALLED TO KEEP GOING**, as our master did.

The Christian life is not for unconcerned strollers, for tourists on a day out, who can turn back if they wish. We are to be pilgrims forever on the way behind Jesus; we are pioneers following the trail of the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, whatever the conditions of travel; we are athletes called to keep going, however tough the race. We are going somewhere with God.

Are we: you and I, going somewhere with the Lord?
Is your parish church going somewhere under your leadership?
Is the Diocese of Southwell & Nottingham going somewhere for God?
I hope and pray so.

We are not concerned about winning. We simply need to cross the line - to complete the race, to finish well. As it is often said, Christian ministry is not about success: it is about faithfulness.

That is our calling. So:

- if you are a new churchwarden or incumbent this year, and you are fearful for the future;
- or if you are an old hand yet are struggling to keep going;

Take heart, we are in this together; and the Lord Jesus is ahead of us, leading the way. There are many who have gone this way before us and encourage us on: the great “cloud of witnesses”, the Communion of Saints. And best of all, there is adventure and fulfillment ahead, as well as hard graft.

SO WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Our primary calling is to go outside, to seek and to serve others.

Did you know that the derivation of the word “parish” is from the ancient Greek word *paroiki*, which literally means “those outside the house”. It was used to describe those parts of Greek cities where non-citizens lived: the “*paroiki*” were the people who were cast out, who didn’t belong. The parish church began to emerge as the genius of the Church in England in Saxons times and was designed as a response to people outside the church who were in need. So from the first our parish churches have existed for those outside our walls. In essence the medieval parish system was a mission strategy.

I think that’s fantastic. It is the best of C of E traditions. Whoever had the idea and christened it “parish”, was a prophet and an evangelist. How sad that at times we lose sight of our outward facing origins and put much misplaced emphasis and energy on what goes on inside our church buildings. It is more than sad: it is plain wrong.

There are so many traditional expectations upon us all as leaders in a parish:

- As a churchwarden am I purely a caretaker, an organizer of rotas, a receptor of complaints?
- As an incumbent am I a pastor or manager or missionary or entrepreneur? What are our roles in this changing world?

Our Charge tonight is for you to remember that we are called to be generous and hospitable to the outsider:

- to the bereaved at the funeral,
- to that rowdy and thoughtless baptismal party,
- to the youths who congregate in the churchyard,
- to the faculty objector who thinks it's sacrilege for sacred space to provide for toilet and kitchen facilities
- to the individuals and families on the outside who turn to us in deepest need.
- to the asylum seeker

We have the privilege of being their parish church.

Two caterpillars were crawling along. They looked up and saw a beautiful butterfly flitting around. One caterpillar turned to the other and said, "Charlie, you'll never get me up in one of those things!"

Our Charge tonight is to remember that we are part of something that has always changed and transformed down the centuries; and to face the cost of being leaders in an outward facing church. God calls us to be part of this evolving mission strategy called parish church.

That brings me back to the picture of the athlete in the stadium striving for the tape. Listen again to that part of our reading: *"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us ..."*

In our parish mission we are called to **TRAVEL LIGHT** - to lay aside every weight that holds us back. No serious athlete runs with weights chained to their ankles! Many of us have considered the 4 Mission Values in our Mission Template. We have implemented some of the Mission Questions, but I suspect few have followed through on the 4 Mission Challenges, especially:

"What must we stop doing?" – those things that bring death rather than life."

If we are to be a missionary church, a flexible church, a church serious about bringing the Gospel to outsiders, then what handicaps are we to cut from our ankles? What are the weights that hold us back? Some of us have become far too institutionalized, far too weighed down by unnecessary traditions, which were right for previous times, but not for today.

Let me suggest just a couple of possibilities.

- The burden of too many PCCs, especially in rural benefices.
- Then there are the church buildings, that, no matter how beautiful or loved, are no longer fit for purpose, or are simply in the wrong place. Having considered Key

Leadership Posts and Deanery boundaries it is now time to review our buildings. The Diocesan Synod and Bishop's Council have begun considering a buildings strategy for the future, which we all need to share in (probably from 2009).

You will all know the particular things that weigh down the Gospel in your own parish. It will take leadership courage to loose you from these chains and weights. **Our Charge tonight** is to pray for that courage and to act on it in the years to come in your parish.

A baby camel was talking to the mother camel. As kid's do it had all sorts of questions.

"Mum, why have we got these big humps on our backs?"

"Well dear, that's to store water for when we go for days out in desert where there is none."

"Mum, why do we have these great big eye lashes?"

"Well dear, that's to stop the sand getting in our eyes in the desert."

"Mum, why have we got these great big feet?"

"Darling, that's to help us walk steadily in the desert on the shifting sand."

"Mum, why are we in Regent's Park Zoo?"

We are equipped by God. Will we go out to use the gifts we have been given.

But there is **one final part of our Charge**: it is the most personal and by far the most difficult. For there is another sort of weight that can hold us back in the Christian race, and leadership calling. The writer of Hebrews names it for what it is: *"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely"* We all know that there are times in our ministries where we, and the church, are hampered by our own sin, individual and corporate:

- that thoughtless word or deed against a colleague
- that deliberate attempt to hide our fear or failure
- that antagonism that continually rears inside us against that person or that proposal
- that awful hidden truth that weighs us down.

How do we deal with our own human sin and frailty? Again this early Christian apologist has the simple but profound answer: *looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.* The Greek here means "look away" to Jesus, away from the problem, away from the sin that holds us back... to the Lord Jesus. The true Christian athlete, pioneer and leader fixes their eyes on Jesus and his loving death on the cross. From him alone comes forgiveness, renewal and courage to lead.

Archdeacon Nigel and I want to **underline our thanks** and that of the Bishop to all who have taken on the role of churchwarden, even if you have done so with some trepidation and sense of inadequacy. Also to all parish clergy for your unstinting service to your parishes, communities and congregations.

Thank you churchwardens, thank you clergy, and thanks be to God.

Peter Hill, May 2008

A Lutheran Collect

*Lord God,
you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*